

[Tim Johnson, Burlington Free Press](#)

Wal-mart has scrapped plans to build a superstore near the site of the Battle of the Wilderness in northern Virginia, yielding to a long-running battlefield-preservation campaign in which Vermonters figured prominently.

Vermont soldiers suffered extraordinary casualties in that two-day battle of May 5-6, 1864, and in so doing helped the Union Army prevail in a pivotal Civil War encounter. The site thus has a special significance in Vermont's history and inspired the state's political leaders to weigh in after the development fray began in Orange County, Va., a couple of years ago.

The retailer's withdrawal, on the eve of a court hearing over a legal challenge brought by preservationists, drew praise from the battlefield's Vermont defenders, among them Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., and Civil War historian Howard Coffin. Welch has been a ardent opponent of the store's proposed siting.

"It's a wonderful tribute to the memory of Vermonters who served in the Civil War," Welch said of the outcome. "Vermont lost more soldiers in the Civil War per capita than any other state in the union, and sustained more casualties in the Battle of the Wilderness than in any other Civil War battle."

Roughly one-in-three Vermont soldiers who fought in that battle was killed or wounded. Casualties totaled 1,234, which Welch called "the greatest loss in the history of Vermont." Casualties for both sides over the two days totaled about 29,000.

As Coffin tells it, the Vermonters' sacrifice was a testament both to their courage and to the key role they played in the battle after it began on May 5. They stood up to a Confederate attack that threatened to divide the Union forces.

"They kept the Army of the Potomac from being cut in two," Coffin said. "They stood their

ground." Coffin characterized the battle, which inaugurated Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's overland campaign against the Confederate army, as "tremendously important."

In 2006, then-Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., secured federal funding to acquire more land for the battleground site, and he arranged for a granite monument — a 17-ton depiction of Camels Hump — to be installed on that tract.

In 2007, Wal-mart announced plans for a store to be located near, but not within, the National Military Park. Preservationists began organizing in opposition. In early 2009, the Vermont Legislature adopted a resolution calling on Walmart to find another place for its store — an action, Coffin said, that "made it a national issue."

In May 2009, Welch toured the battlefield with a colleague, Rep. Ted Poe, R-Texas, and actor Robert Duvall, who had played Robert E. Lee in a 2003 film. They issued a joint appeal for Wal-mart to build elsewhere. Welch called the battlefield "a cathedral of suffering."

Nevertheless, in August 2009, the Orange County Board of Supervisors issued the permit Wal-mart needed to build. Preservationists then mounted a legal challenge that was to culminate in this week's hearing.

Had Wal-mart carried through with its plan, Coffin said, "The result would have been horrific" — a despoliation of "hallowed ground."

Instead, Wal-mart spokesman Bill Wertz said Wednesday, the company decided to seek a site somewhere else in Orange County. The 52 acres in question near the battlefield will be preserved permanently and not developed, he said.

Wertz noted that the site had been commercially zoned for 30 years and that Wal-mart had concluded, from archaeological findings, that nothing of historical significance had occurred there. Nevertheless, he said, the siting was a matter of internal debate as the company sought to strike a balance between preservation and commerce. As the court hearing neared, he said, preservation won out.

Among those applauding the outcome was Gov. Peter Shumlin, who issued a statement that said in part:

"Our brave soldiers gave their lives to keep the country together and end slavery. It would have been an awful loss to have that battlefield covered in the shadow of a Walmart store."

Welch issued a joint statement with Poe, a colleague with whom, Welch said, he agrees on virtually nothing else.

"We appreciate Wal-mart's decision to build elsewhere and we applaud the leadership and advocacy of those who fought to preserve this important landmark," the two congressmen said in a news release.

Poe wanted to honor the memory of Texas soldiers who fought valiantly on the Confederate side, under Lee.

As Coffin recounts it, Lee was so heartened on May 6 by the arrival of Texas troops that he tried to lead them into battle himself, but they wouldn't let him.

"I would charge hell itself for that old man," one of the loyal Texans memorably said.

Coffin was at home Wednesday in Montpelier when his wife, scrolling the Internet, stumbled across the Wal-mart news.

"My God, you won," Coffin said she told him. "I put on a coat and tie and went down to the Legislature to thank everybody."

"Vermont getting into it early really made a difference," Coffin said. "It's a wonderful day. It's a great day for battlefield preservation."